



Gathered Fragments

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Pennsylvania's Catholic Pioneers

By Blanche McGuire

Pennsylvania's earliest Catholic pioneers, though few in number, left a legacy rich in faith. Who were Pennsylvania's Catholics?

The first were Indians converted by French and later English missionaries in the 17th and early 18th centuries. More permanent Catholic settlers arrived from Europe when Penn's colony took root and became known for religious tolerance.

In Old Philadelphia, Catholics came from a variety of nations. Early settlers included English, Irish, Germans, Austrians, Italians, Canadians, Spanish, Portuguese, Belgians, French and Blacks.

On the Pennsylvania frontier, most Catholics were German, Irish or English. Most Germans immigrated to Philadelphia then moved westward. Many Irish and English Catholics fled to the Pennsylvania/Maryland frontier to escape Maryland's harsh penal codes enacted against Catholics after 1688.

Early Pennsylvania Catholics were primarily poor emigrant farmers. However, Church records do show a wide diversity ranging from aristocrats to indentured servants or slaves. Non-Catholics sometimes played a major role in Catholic life serving as baptismal sponsors and participants in interfaith marriages.

Where did Catholics live?

There were three early permanent centers of Catholicism in Pennsylvania.

One was a Catholic settlement at Conewago in central Pennsylvania. Conewago is four miles west of Hanover, 10 miles east of Gettysburg and just north of the Maryland border. Jesuit missionaries reportedly celebrated Conewago's first Mass at an Indian village atop a hill about 1719. Not long afterward, Irish and English Catholics

from Maryland settled in the Conewago area in the 1720s and 1730s. During the next century, Conewago missionaries ministered to Catholics throughout Central and Western Pennsylvania and Northern Maryland.

A second Catholic center was St Joseph's parish in Old Philadelphia. Father Joseph Greateon S.J. was the first pastor. St Joseph's boundaries stretched well beyond Philadelphia into Chester and Delaware counties and New Jersey.

The third Catholic center was in Berks County at Goshenhoppen. Known today as Bally, Goshenhoppen

is 45 miles northwest of Philadelphia and 25 miles from Valley Forge. As early as the 1720s, German Catholic emigrants came to Goshenhoppen from Philadelphia. Goshenhoppen's first permanent priest (Father Schneider) was assigned in 1741. The Goshenhoppen Mission served a wide circuit covering most of Southeastern Pennsylvania. Goshenhoppen's church records are the oldest in the 13 colonies.

What was it like to be Catholic in colonial Pennsylvania?

Compared to other colonies where

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Remembering Sr. Anna Mary Gibson, R.S.M.



With a sparkle in her eyes and a smile on her face, Sister Anna Mary Gibson was a woman filled with humility and a sense of duty. A native of Lawrenceville, she joined the Sisters of Mercy and professed vows in 1937. She served at St. Paul's Orphanage in Crafton and then taught in schools in the Pittsburgh, Greensburg and Puerto Rico dioceses.

In 1975, Sister Anna Mary changed careers, taking the position of archivist and historian at Mercy Hospital. During her tenure at Mercy, she authored the second volume of the two-volume series *Mercy Hospital: A Historical Review* and edited a booklet titled *Historical Sketches*. As the archivist, she scoured the hospital for historical documents and photographs, bringing them all together in the Mercy Hospital Archives. She organized, preserved and displayed

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Catholic Pioneers in Pennsylvania

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houses, and Catholic settlers died along with their Protestant neighbors.

Not surprisingly, Catholics were well represented in the fight for American independence when the Revolutionary War broke out in 1775.

Some of the best-known Catholics in the Revolution came from St Joseph's parish in Philadelphia. Colonel Stephen Moylan was Washington's aide-de-camp, cavalry leader, and head of Commissary Department. Commodore John Barry was the father of the American Navy.

Ordinary Catholics also served the American cause as evidenced by the records of a few Goshenhoppen Catholics.

On Aug. 7, 1777, Christopher Eckenroth of Lynn Township, Northampton County, subscribed to the "Oath of Allegiance and Fidelity to the State of Pennsylvania." Other subscribers on the same day were his brother George and his brother-in-law Frederick Lutz.

During the Revolutionary War, Christopher served in 1778 as a Corporal in Captain Matthias Probst's 6th Company, 3rd Battalion of the Northampton County militia. This was the same unit in which his brother George served as Private 6th Class and his brother-in-law, Frederick Lutz, served as Sergeant.

Catholic army chaplains and Jesuit missionaries ministered to Catholic Americans and French in the General Hospital in Allentown. At war's end, a Mass of Thanksgiving was celebrated in Philadelphia.

For Pennsylvania's Catholic pioneers and those elsewhere, the new

United States forever ended the days of test oaths, discriminatory taxes and restrictions on public worship. The First Amendment to the Constitution in 1789 stated unequivocally that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

And the new American church now had its own Bishop, John Carroll in Baltimore.

After the Revolution, Pennsylvania's Catholics prospered. Catholic schools and vocations grew. The laity supported their Church with cash donations, labor, land grants and bequests. Descendants of the early Goshenhoppen and Conewago settlers and new emigrants pushed westward over the Alleghenies, establishing new centers of Catholicity including Prince Gallitzin's Loretto, Greensburg, Butler County, Brownsville and Pittsburgh.

Over the next century, as immigration grew, Pennsylvania's Catholics surged into the national consciousness, entered politics, began to work in mines and mills and built the railroads. While they still faced discrimination in employment and society, their status improved with each decade.

However, the record shows that the real story of Pennsylvania's Catholics began long before in wilderness cabins and Old Philadelphia. It began with families who opened their homes as Mass Houses or who kept their faith in spite of test oaths and taxes and protests from civil authorities. Today's Catholics will forever be in their debt both as a public church and as individuals whose ancestors gave us a heritage of faith that continues to this day.

Sister Anna Mary

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this material, and she was the main reference source for information about Mercy Hospital. In 1990, she left Mercy Hospital to accept a similar position at Carlow College.

Sister Anna Mary was an active participant of any group to which she belonged. From 1985 until her death, she was a member of the Board of Directors for the Catholic Historical Society. She was a promoter of the Society and convinced many active individuals to join the Board, including myself. She also was a member of the Coalition for Archival and Records Professionals of Western Pennsylvania, and within that group she was known as a dynamic and energetic individual. She was actively involved in several committees at the Motherhouse, including designing the new chapel.

First and foremost, though, was the sense of humor that was at the basis of Sr. Anna Mary's personality. Her eyes would twinkle and she would let out a slight chuckle when someone would tease her — and then she would immediately tease that person right back. She could communicate with the old and the young — and she made wonderful cookies!

Sister Anna Mary Gibson, age 79, a Sister of Mercy for 62 years, died Dec. 27, 1999. The members of the Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania will always fondly remember her.

— *Kathleen M. Washy*
Archivist, Mercy Hospital

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